

Bringing Global Awareness to the Classroom



An amazing phenomenon is happening in my school; students are coming up to me to ask about my African heritage and wondering how I speak English so fluently and yet know a lot about my land of birth, its cultures, its tongues and its people. Most of the students in my first school were Caucasian but there was a healthy mix of Arab, Caribbean and Asian. Few of them had been taught by a black teacher, and I noticed the look of surprise on their faces when I first walked into the class. I had expected it, but I was not prepared for this question right out of the blue:

“**M**s., why are black people better at sports than white people or Asians?”

Throughout my years in that school, I had to dispel quite a number of myths similar to the one just mentioned, and not just with students. With parents, it was frighteningly similar. I recall one

parent teacher interview when I sat in the science laboratory waiting for my next appointment. The parent was late, so I wandered into the hallway to find a man in his late forties pacing up and down the hallway. I had actually seen him peak into the laboratory while I was waiting. He smiled and continued

pacing so I smiled and went back into the laboratory. After five minutes, I went back out into the hallway to find the man still there, so I asked him if he was looking for Dr. Ashun, and then he asked if I knew where ‘he’ was. At that point, I introduced myself to this parent, who responded with a look of shock, shame and admiration, all zipping across his face at awesome speeds, one after another. When he had composed himself, he came into the laboratory where we had a great conversation about his daughter, who had mysteriously not told her father that her grade 12 chemistry teacher was a young black woman!

In another school where I taught, there was a better ethnic balance of students, and yet they all hung out in their various cultural groups. When discussing the Canadian nutritional guidelines in a biology class, I had to be able to incorporate different diets in the discussion, knowing that many of my students didn’t eat potatoes in one form or another on a regular basis. During Ramadan, I had to be conscious of the fact that many of my Muslim students were less alert than usual, going through a demanding fasting schedule.

When travelling outside Canada, it is wonderful to see that we are regarded as a successful multicultural society, but this tends to be a whole-country view, one not held by many of the communities within Canada. Many of us just pretend these cultural differences don’t matter in the classroom when the reality is that our students are not globally aware. Very few students come into grade nine with a good understanding of geography outside North America, and they are certainly not knowledgeable about events happening in other

countries. Our geography courses need to have another dimension added to them – one that includes countries other than Canada and the USA. Hearing comments like: “Why would we have to know where those countries are anyway – we’re never having anything to do with them are we?” makes me realize that global awareness

the schools that I’ve taught in:

■ Have a cultural awareness day when students dress up in costumes that depict their cultural heritage. It’s always easier to do this at the elementary level, where dressing up is a fun thing to do, but it’s a huge challenge at the high school level. Eliciting the help of the students’ council will go a long way

Greece, Egypt, Ghana, Thailand and China. In the afternoon, we had an ‘Olympics’ with students representing one of the five continents in various activities. A “tug of war of nations” ended a day filled with new learning experiences and an appreciation of where we all came from. Two words that describe that day are respect and inclusiveness.

■ Adopt a class in another part of the world, and have each student write to an e-pal once a week, describing their life in Canada. Of course this will only work in countries where Internet connectivity is available – students may be surprised to learn that many countries are online. In some third world countries, snail mail will suffice and is still effective in creating global awareness.

■ At the high school level, plan cultural trips for the weeklong spring break in March. Many students have shown a willingness to do this and become involved in fundraising to help pay for the trip.

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education is a must for all our classrooms right from grade one through to twelve. But how do we do this? There isn’t much room in the timetable to insert another course and many high school students are reluctant to take an extra course that does not give them credit towards graduation. What is a teacher to do? The following are some of the ideas that I have implemented in

toward establishing some legitimacy with the entire student body. Where I have been involved in cultural awareness days, students were invited to bring in foods from different countries for a ‘taste fest’, which always drew huge crowds. Comments like “Wow, this tastes great, how do you make it” were heard all through the cafeteria, as students proudly displayed foods from

The advertisement features a red background with a large white archway. Inside the archway, the text reads: "Queen's University Graduate Studies in Education". Below this, the programs listed are: "M.Ed. (Curriculum and Instruction)", "M.Ed. (Educational Studies)", and "Ph.D. (Curriculum, Culture and Learning)". Contact information is provided: "For details visit www.educ.queensu.ca", "Tel 613 533-6206", "Fax 613 533-6584", "Email med@educ.queensu.ca or phd@educ.queensu.ca". The Queen's University crest and name are in the top right. A photograph of a building and trees is in the bottom right, with the text "Faculty of Education" below it.

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Les stéréotypes et les mythes culturels sont encore répandus dans nos écoles. S'il est vrai que le Canada a la réputation d'être une société multiculturelle harmonieuse, bon nombre de nos élèves (et de leurs parents) ne sont pas sensibilisés au monde qui existe au-delà des frontières de leurs pays. Puisant dans son expérience d'enseignante canado-africaine, Mary Ashun fait des recommandations pour promouvoir une meilleure entente interculturelle dans les écoles, lesquelles recommandations ne risquent pas d'alourdir un programme d'études déjà chargé.

■ Design a credit course to introduce students to cultures within the school.

■ Invite guest speakers to the school from various communities. In Ontario, the children's author Adwoa Badoe provides workshops and presentations to educate students about the African presence in Canada. Her website www.afroculture.com gives ideas on how to bring African Culture into the



classroom. During Christmas, some schools are able to bring in speakers who share their experiences with other cultural celebrations like Chanukah, Eid and Kwanza.

■ Let students see successful Canadians who don't always look like them by bringing in young speakers – like Ohenewa Akuffo, the Canadian female wrestler (www.ohenewa.ca) and Kojo Aidoo of the CFL – who are both of African heritage and are very willing to speak to school groups.

■ At the administrative level, empower teachers who show an interest in promoting cultural awareness in their schools. Several teachers I have spoken to are willing to talk about their cultures and the immigrant experience, but they are not always encouraged to do so.

Numerous Canadian websites provide resources for teachers who want to implement some of these ideas. The following link is an amazing resource for a committee designed to foster cultural awareness: <http://www.peelschools.org/slgd/resources.html>

I have spoken to various creators of educational content who wonder why teachers do not use the resources that are 'out there' – created specifically for them to help with delivery of multi-cultural curriculum. The number one issue for most is time; with a full class day, when is a teacher able to get on the Internet to access that information? Could humanitarian

organisations, with wonderful access to global information, be brought in as partners to help with this process? UNICEF Canada has a great website (www.unicef.ca) that has a lot of information for teachers to access and use in the classroom, but in an informal survey that I took, neither elementary nor secondary teachers had any idea that such a resource existed, and just over 60% even knew that UNICEF had a presence in Canada! (*Editor's note: See article on page 49 by David Agnew, CEO of UNICEF Canada.*) Clearly something needs to be done to bring all concerned parties together to strategize and come up with the best way to get the information where it needs to go – into the classroom.

Becoming a caring, concerned, active and informed global citizen requires knowledge; the more students know, the better they will understand their role in their local community, Canada and the international community. 🌍

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